

THE
Murmuring Deep

REFLECTIONS ON THE
BIBLICAL UNCONSCIOUS

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg



Schocken Books · New York

ness and separation. And ultimately, Jacob allows that otherness a place inside his narrative, *al pi Ha-Shem, by the word of God*. No longer, in Kristeva's expression, *abjecting* all that challenges his mastery, he acknowledges that which haunts him.

Essentially, he acknowledges not only his wife but—another unknown woman—his mother. The history of Rebecca's *anokhi*, the vanishing point of knowledge, had turned out to be endless. "She was what he had missed"—her subjectivity, like his, had been premised on intense bonds that could barely be recognized: with her father, with Isaac, with Esau, with Jacob. Excessive, threatening her identity, these bonds had also created and sustained her.

The abyss of separation from "what was mine and is henceforth but irreparably alien," the flash that bedazzled her—that is one dimension of her history. But, always, she will remain the Rebecca who confronted that blinding knowledge and "went to seek God." Seeking what no one had sought before her, she finds the God who affirms her disunity of being. She recognizes Him because He brings her internal otherness to life, giving it words, a future. He positions her, eternally pregnant, to intimate a rich ambiguity: *I-yet-not-I*.

EIGHT

Blindness and Blessing

Isaac Trembles Twice

TEARING OPEN AND TURNING OVER TIME

Isaac is the inscrutable patriarch. He neither journeys in quest toward the Holy Land nor in exile from it; his life is spent within its borders, cultivating its soil. Unlike his father and his son, he lives out his life with one wife; and although, like them, he experiences difficulty in procreation, his narrative of infertility is, unlike theirs, encompassed in the brief space of one verse. The two major episodes of his life represent him in a passive role: in the *Akedah*, he is the bound one, silent and immobilized, while Abraham lives the test and the drama; and when he bestows the family blessing on his son Jacob, he does so unwittingly, deceived by his own blindness and Jacob's manipulations.

This general sketch of Isaac suggests a figure set in low relief, lacking the energy proper to a hero. Yet the word *love* appears for the first time in the biblical text to describe his relation to his wife. And he alone of the patriarchs is described in intimate "play" with Rebecca. If erotic energy unexpectedly characterizes him, so, too, ^{Gen. 24:1} does material success: he sows seed and the earth yields him "a hundred-fold" on his investment. We remember Freud's criterion for a well-realized life—success in love and work. By this measure, he lives a vigorous life. And yet, his figure remains mysterious, deeply ambiguous.

His first autonomous act is his prayer for children. Rebecca is barren. "And Isaac pleaded with God on behalf of his wife, for she was barren. And God responded to his plea and his wife Rebecca conceived" (*Gen. 25:21*). The word used here for prayer is unusual: *va-ye'etar*. Rashi translates this as intense, persistent prayer. It is striking, however, that, unlike Abraham, Isaac is never heard to pray for children. Abraham pleads with God on several occasions, even after

Ishmael is born: he wants a child from Sarah. We hear the words of his desire, his debate with God. In other words, he prays. Yet these speeches are not formally described as "prayer."¹

Isaac's voice in prayer is silent in the text. Yet he is described as *pleading*, and, unlike Abraham, he is immediately answered: *Vaye'ater lo*—a striking expression in which God responds to his plea by accepting the passive position—"He was entreated": that is, He accepted Isaac's prayer. The power of Isaac's wordless prayer is unique and instantaneous.

The Talmud offers a remarkable image for the peculiar power of prayer:

R. Isaac stated: Why is the prayer of the righteous compared to a pitchfork [*attar*]? As a pitchfork turns the sheaves of grain from one position to another, so does the prayer of the righteous turn the dispensations of God from the attribute of anger to the attribute of mercy.²

The transformative energy of prayer can move God from anger to mercy. The pitchfork tosses the grain sheaves, changing their position and place. The act of *turning, inverting*, is *revolutionary*; it reveals what was hidden. The word *attar*, a pitchfork, is also the term for a plough, which turns over the sods of earth to create a newly fertile surface. The motion of pitchfork or plough tears open, enters darkness to bring to light something that had been buried. The prayer of the righteous, the midrash claims, has this transfigurative effect; but it is specifically Isaac's prayer that works through the resonances of the pun—*va-ye'etar*—plead/pitchfork—to suggest a descent into darkness, an upheaval that inverts the previous order.

Similarly, the notion of *turning* is central to a classic midrash on the study of Torah: "Turn it over and over, for all is in it."³ Precisely because it contains all, the Torah requires this kind of transfigurative study: the plough exposes new surfaces of earth to the light and the student reveals unexpected, or long-buried facets of meaning.

The turning plough offers Osip Mandelstam a metaphor for the way poetry can penetrate the past:

Poetry is the plough tearing open and turning over time so that the deep layers of it, its rich black undersoil, ends up on the surface. . . . Mankind . . . craves, like a ploughman, for the virgin soil of time.⁴

Here, the past is an object of desire; its resources yield to poetry's work of "tearing open and turning over time." The plough tears fragments from the depths and sets them in new alignments with one another. It disturbs a basic position of "immobilized totality."⁵ Both in the study of Torah and in prayer, the plough image suggests new ways of connecting the present with the past.

As a description of Isaac's mode of prayer, however, the image holds peculiar force. Beit Ya'akov makes a radical suggestion: Isaac's wordless prayer expresses an intense surrender, a prayerful pressure, that accumulates as he refrains from particular, articulated requests. His prayers form deep grooves within his heart, accessing unconscious seams of experience. The passion of that life beyond conscious expression is what he brings to God: an inner darkness of surrender.

Gen. 25:

Isaac is here imagined as sustaining his essential life in the depths, in the dark. Indeed, his meeting with his future wife, Rebecca, happens at a moment *lifnot erev*—"at the turn of the evening"—when he has emerged *lasu'ach basadeh*, to meditate in the field, or, according to the midrashic reading, to pray the afternoon prayer.⁶ Darkness has just cast its first shadows as Isaac initiates a new genre of prayer: *tefillat minchah*, the afternoon prayer, at the turn of the evening. Here, already, is the model of an unarticulated prayer, provoking the reader's imagination: Isaac's darkness is turned, quickly, to love.

When Isaac prays his underground prayer, God comes to meet him. Like tunnels meeting, God responds to his prayer:

Vaye'ater lo—"And God responded to his plea . . ." As in the parable of the prince who dug [*hattar*] a tunnel into his father's palace to gain a gold treasure: the one excavated from within while the other excavated from outside.⁷

Attar (pleading, ploughing) resonates with *hattar* (underground burrowing that opens a passage for prayer): God subversively aids Isaac in his efforts to break into the palace. In Rashi's version, God allows himself to be urged, persuaded, seduced (*nitpateh*) by Isaac's prayer: He desires Isaac's wordless desire.

In his work in the world, too, Isaac plays at the seam between the hidden and the manifest. His two main activities are digging wells and sowing seed. His servants dig in the wadi; "And they found there a well of living water" (Gen. 26:19). The wonder of life emerging from the depths is reflected in a Rabbinic teaching: "If one dreams of a well, one should rise early and say, 'A well of living water.'"⁸ The dream of a well holds sinister as well as vital possibilities: interpreting the dream, therefore, giving words to what was wordless, becomes an urgent task. "All dreams follow the mouth":⁹ meaning is created in the telling.

As sower of seed, too, Isaac is successful beyond measure: in a time of famine, "Isaac sowed in that land and reaped [lit., found] a hundredfold that year; and God blessed him" (Gen. 26:12). Again, blessing comes in the form of subterranean activity: he deposits seed into the soil only to find a hundredfold. His world of food and water issues from the resources of darkness: from the depths, life repeatedly surprises him.¹⁰

THE AKEDAH—AN IMPENDING DARKNESS

The imagery of pitchfork, plough, subversive tunneling in the dark, digging wells, and sowing seed creates a characteristic intimate tonality. Ultimately, a literal darkness falls on his eyes: "And when Isaac grew old, his eyes were too dim to see" (Gen. 27:1). Although old age fully accounts for his blindness, the midrash offers a poignant history of a different sort: *mei're'ot* ("Too dim to see") is read, quite literally, "from seeing . . .":

His eyes became dim *from the impact of that seeing*. When Abraham bound his son on the altar, the angels wept; as it is written, "Hark! The Arielites cry aloud" (Isa. 33:7). And the tears dropped

from their eyes into his eyes and were imprinted within his eyes till he became old and his eyes became dim."¹¹

Isaac becomes blind as a result of the angels' tears that fell into his eyes at the moment of the *Akedah*. This classic midrash connects the two major events of his life, the *Akedah* and the stolen blessing. Between these two moments, underground, as it were, unconsciously, the wound made by the angels' tears has been developing, till in old age it seals him in darkness. On the altar, he did not weep for himself: he lay with open eyes staring upward. The angels weep in protest and pity at the impending sacrifice. Isaac becomes an object of outraged compassion.

With that sense of himself as seen by angels at the moment of death, he lives his life. It becomes his "unthought known":¹² imprinted deep, unfathomed, until, in old age, he decides to bless his son Esau. An always impending darkness falls. What is it in this later narrative that precipitates the full impact of the earlier narrative?

Another midrash focuses on the moment of death on the altar:

When the knife touched his neck, his soul departed [lit., took wing]. And when God made His voice heard from among the angels, saying, "Do not lay your hand on the boy," his soul returned to his body. And Isaac rose to his feet and Isaac knew that in this way the dead would return to life. And he opened his mouth and declared, "Blessed are you, God who revives the dead."¹³

"His soul took wing and left him." Is this the jolt of terror that anticipates death? Or is it, simply, a notation for dying? Although a certain ambiguity hangs over the midrashic expression, here it clearly refers to death. For an instant, Isaac departs; and returns. His blessing as he stands solidly on his feet again marks his passage from death to life: he *knows* that the dead will be revived—not through prophetic knowledge, but through physical experience. To thank God for his resurrection, he coins the blessing that is said three times daily in the *Amidah* prayer.

yom u-g'noovti laylah. See also *Sekhel Tov* 37:33: Jacob sets his scrupulous guarding of Laban's flocks from wild beasts against the fate of his beloved son: "My way is hidden from God!"

CHAPTER EIGHT: BLINDNESS AND BLESSING:
ISAAC TREMBLES TWICE

1. The expression *va-yitpallel*, the usual term for prayer, is used only once, of his prayer for Avimelekh (Gen. 20:17).
2. *B. Yevamot* 64a.
3. *Avot* 5:22.
4. Mandelstam, "Slovo i kul'tura," *Sobranie socinenij v dvux tomax*, vol. 2 (New York: 1966), 266. Quoted in Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 37.
5. See Boyarin, 37–38, on Benjamin's practice of a "poetics of quotation, which breaches and continues a tradition," and on Arendt's description of his work of "tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrated one another." Boyarin argues that the intertextuality of midrash serves a similar recuperative purpose, "preserving the old by making it new."
6. See Rashi to Genesis 24:63.
7. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:5.
8. *B. Berakhot* 56b.
9. *B. Berakhot* 55b.
10. See Rashi to Genesis 26:12: "That was a bad year in a bad land."
11. *Bereshit Rabbah* 65:5.
12. Christopher Bollas's expression, e.g., "a substantial part of our self [is] somehow deeply known . . . yet unthought." (*Being a Character* [New York: Hill and Wang: 1992], 51.)
13. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 31.
14. See *Pesikta Rabbati*, *Targum Yonatan*, *Aggadot Bereshit*, cited in RaDaL on *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 31 [35] [36].
15. *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 101.
16. Rashi to Genesis 16:13.
17. Ramban to Genesis 24:62.
18. Cathy Caruth, "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud," in *Trauma and Self*, ed. Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 29.
19. *Ibid.*, 32.
20. *Ibid.*, 34.
21. *Ibid.*, 38–39.
22. Cited in Caruth, "Recapturing the Past: Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 154–55.
23. *Ibid.*, 204.
24. *Tanchuma* 13.
25. *Shemot Rabbah* 29:3.
26. See Caruth, "Traumatic Departures," 37, for a discussion of Freud's applica-

tion of these questions to the rather different material of *Moses and Monotheism*.

27. Caruth, "Traumatic Departures," 35.
28. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 54–56.
29. John Berger, "Drawn to That Moment," in *The Sense of Sight* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 146–47.
30. *Ibid.*, 148–49.
31. *Ibid.*, 150–51.
32. Isaac is named after Abraham and Sarah's laughter (Gen. 17:17, 18:12) at his annunciation. His birth is celebrated by the joyful incredulity of Sarah's "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (21:6). These moments are gathered into his own experience in his lovemaking, called *laughter or play (metzachek)*, with his wife (26:8).
33. See *Sifrei Devarim*, 31.
34. The game, in this midrashic reading, is Isaac; and it is Esau's mouth, his seductive words, that are the means of seduction. (See Rashi to Genesis 25:28.)
35. See Sefat Emet 103.
36. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:16.
37. See Sefat Emet 103: the blessing is appropriate for one who has moved far from holiness and who needs blessing to find his own access point.
38. Jacob uses the idiom in Genesis 27:19; Isaac again in Genesis 27:25; Esau in Genesis 27:31.
39. See Genesis 1:20, 19:9, 46:15, 46:22.
40. See, e.g., Proverbs 13:4.
41. In Ramban's reading, Rebecca warns Jacob that his father's blessing will be divinely inspired, so that if Esau is blessed, Jacob will be left with no significant role in the family destiny. By inserting the idiom "in the presence of God" into her report, Rebecca is insisting on the gravity of this blessing.
42. Rashi translates: "In the presence of God": By His permission; that He may approve of my blessing." The power of Isaac's blessing is qualified here: he himself acknowledges that his words will take effect only if God consents. He wishes, or prays, that God may validate his blessing. His words have no enchanting power; their validity will depend entirely on God's assent.
43. See Or Ha-Chaim to Genesis 27:24.
44. Ernest Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 240; quoted in Shlomith Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity—The Example of James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 229.
45. Shklovsky quoted in Rimmon, 229.
46. See 2 Kings 3:15: "As the musician played, the hand of God came upon him."
47. Joseph Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985), 71.
48. *Ibid.*, 79.
49. *Ibid.*, 83.
50. Caruth, "Traumatic Departures," 39.
51. *Bereshit Rabbah* 67:3.